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THE MESHCHERA FLOOD PLAINS

Konstantin Paustovsky was writing for all wanderers, for all lovers of the wind, sky, fragrant grasses and bottomless waters when he described the land with the fairy-tale name of Meshchera...

As the prickly snow beats against the window on winter evenings and you turn the pages of your book before going to bed, the warm branches of a fir tree close in on the lamp, you can smell the damp marshes, and suddenly you hear the pounding cries of the black grouse. Haycocks, marsh tussocks with mature, pellet-like lily-of-the-valley blossoms... The moon in the river is broken into slivers by the swimming fish... The black lake, mushrooms the size of a calf's head, the calls of unknown birds... The snow rustles outside your window. You turn out the light and make yourself a promise: you'll go there as soon as the thaw comes. It isn't far-away Africa; it's close by. Get a ticket to Ryazan, and from there walk with the wind at your back or catch a ride with any truck going your way...

At last we were on our way, the two of us. We wore warm jackets and hip-high boots and carried knapsacks on our backs filled with food, notebooks, binoculars, and cameras with zoom lenses. Boris had a portable tape recorder for recording the sounds of the forest. Our tickets would take us to Ryazan, and there we would ask what was the best way to go, or, more precisely, to sail, for the ground is covered with water and there's no distinguishing the river from the lakes or from the flooded fields. There's just water, boats, islands of inundated forests and triangular buoys.

We stopped by the eatery at Shilovo station. The streets were flooded, and we watched from the window as a group of boys made their way to school in a boat, an old man brought a pig to market in a boat, and a woman with an iron and a bundle of laundry rode by in a boat. Fences, telephone poles and apple-trees stood in the water.

"Sorry the bream smells of kerosine," the waitress said.

The bream did give off a distinct smell of kerosine. The ruddy-faced cook explained to two collective farmers why the bream from the Oka River had begun to smell of kerosine.

"Maybe it can't be helped."

"Of course it can be helped."

"You're talking about the Voskresensky Plant? If it were up to me, the director would have nothing to eat but bream. He might not want it, but I'd make him eat it. And the water would soon be less polluted..."

Two fishermen carried bream in a woven basket from the pier to the eatery. The fish were flopping around, trying to jump out of the basket.

"Come see! They're alive and still smelling of kerosine!"

"Hey! You there in the eatery!" someone called from the pier. "Step on it! The captain likes to keep to the schedule."

"Is the whole of Meshchera polluted with kerosine then?"

"No, of course not," replied the fellow with a rifle who was helping us carry our bags across the creaking gang-plank. "You can't compare them. Talk with the captain."

We had a seasoned captain. He took note of our suspicion and said, "I've seen too much to have to lie, boys."

The captain had an anchor tattoo and a scar on his arm. There were dark spots under the skin on his face, the kind left behind by coal and gunpowder. He turned the steering wheel, and the floating landing-stage drifted away. Large circles appeared in the murky flood waters. An old woman fervently crossed herself. She was carrying a basket with live chickens and had a string of buns hung across her sheepskin coat like a belt of ammunition. A swarthy man with an empty arm sleeve and the look of a Tatar flung a half-smoked cigarette out of the boat. He carried a spare part to a tractor and was constantly propping it up with a rag to keep the gear-wheel from knocking against the boat. The deck was covered with piles of mail, cans, sacks of seed, saplings wrapped in tarpaulin, and different articles bought in the district center. A rural store manager dressed in a tarpaulin coat was travelling with two motorcycles and five baby carriages. Wearing rubber jack boots and carrying rifles, two hunters with a dog sat like musketeers on a crate labeled "Fragile". Their catch, three grey geese, lay carelessly at their feet.

In the centre of the deck a young girl in new gum-boots was solemnly perched atop a pile of sacks and baskets. She

held a large mirror carefully in her hands, but she could not remain still. The mirror now reflected the deck-cabin and the dark face of the captain, now the sun, now the granny with the buns, now the young militiaman with the squeaking leather. The militiaman glanced at the mirror out of the corner of his eye, screwed up his courage and sat down beside the young lady. The mirror was still and now reflected only the shoreless water and old white willows. Like a mirage, old churches without roofs and crosses and new white cow sheds emerged from the water and once again disappeared in it. On the tiny islets in the centre of the flood plains stood the neat little houses of the buoy-tenders. Each house showed the obligatory number on its façade: 450... 463... 475... A scarf or cap would be waved at the captain, who answered with a short whistle.

After travelling two hours and just passing the village of Tyrnovo, we saw our first flock of geese take wing to the captain's whistle. Cackling and flying in line formation, the birds soared over the flooded area.

Boris and I grabbed for our knapsacks, but by the time we found the right lens the geese had disappeared behind the forest.

"Don't worry," said the militiaman as he leapt nimbly from the sacks, "It's just the beginning."

He asked to see our documents, just in case. Seventeen pairs of eyes watched the identification procedure with curiosity. The militiaman smiled, saluted and then took his seat again.

"Is it for the movies?" the granny asked as she mouthed a bun in her toothless gums.

"For the paper," the militiaman explained. "They want to write about our region for the whole country."

All at once we had a lot of friends.

"And it's a region to be proud of," said the old woman and put away her bun. "Will you show my house, too?"

"Geese! Geese!"

Everyone on deck now wanted to see the geese. We began to take pictures and almost instantly were out of film. While we were reloading, other flocks flew up behind, ahead of us and directly over the boat. Some were in a triangular formation, others flew randomly. With the excitement of schoolboys we raced from side to side not knowing where to look. And the birds kept coming. A line of cranes flew high in the sky, bisecting the sun; piping ducks were fluttering just over

the water; geese were slowly ascending and descending behind the bushes.

"Look there!"

It was stranger than a dream. The island seemed alive: there was not a meter of free space anywhere. The geese—two, three, maybe even five thousand of them—had landed to rest.

"Get the camera!"

We wanted the geese to fly. Everyone on the boat began waving his or her hands and shouting. The geese became agitated but didn't fly away. The captain sounded his whistle four times. They still wouldn't fly, and the island was already astern. We knew we might never get such a chance again and looked toward the deck-cabin with pleading eyes.

"I have a schedule to keep," the captain said.

"Maybe the schedule's not so important," interceded the old woman.

The captain smiled and nodded.

The boat turned around, sailed half a kilometer in the opposite direction and then turned around. We pulled in from some bushes, and the captain showed us how to jump out of the boat. The water swirled around the tops of our boots, but we didn't care as long as our cameras didn't get wet. We darted to and fro... There were at least three thousand of them! The birds began to stir. They had seen us. There was a rustle of wings, cackling and then a rainbow of water mist...

We returned to the boat drenched, carrying our equipment high overhead.

"Well?" the captain asked on behalf of everyone else.

We happily nodded: we had shot the film. The boat sailed on. After all the excitement, it was quiet on deck. Binoculars were passed from hand to hand, and every now and then someone would say, "Look there!" Atop the submerged willows, rooks were calling and fluttering around; herons stood in the water, too lazy to fly; a skylark hung over the island like a silver bell; and on the island itself, a rabbit was scurrying to and fro, not knowing where to go.

"Sit down and rest a bit, son," the Granny said, motioning with her finger. She was curious to know why we needed to take so many pictures.

People departed at every pier. The militiaman and two hunters got off. Then at the village of Dubrovka the sacks of seed, stack of rakes and bundle of saplings were unloaded.

Here, too, the old woman and the young girl with the mirror got off. With us on deck remained the postman and the one-armed tractor driver. He sat down by us and asked for a cigarette.

"I see you're interested in birds. Do you know that crane feathers bring good luck? I'm serious. When I was twelve years old my father told me: "Try to get yourself a crane feather, Alyosha. But don't you think about shooting one. It has to lose it naturally." But a crane, as everyone knows, doesn't lose many feathers. "Rise up early," my father would say, "he gets the feather who's up before the sun. It's at dawn that the birds and fish bring joy to the heart." I learned how the stream begins in the forest, how to lure the owl at night, and the names of the herbs that grow in the Meshchera. And one day I found a nest in the marsh. There were some eggs there and two crane feathers. My father laughed and said, "Keep them. You're lucky now." And he was right. I started to work and everything went just my way. The girl I fell in love with was glad to marry me. Once we were sitting in a boat and I was talking about the water, the stars and the birds. She put her arms around me and said, "I like you, Alyosha..." I showed her the feather once as a joke. Her eyes grew bright and she told me, "Keep it..."

"Later I went off to the war like everyone else. I remember the trenches at Bryansk. We were cold and wet, had only a handful of ammunition and licked our plates for the last morsel of food. But when I thought about this place my heart would grow warm. I thought about my first days at work and about walking through the forests. Aleksei, I said to myself, you've got something to be in this trench for. When we marched west it was a lot easier. I got all the way to the border without being wounded. But that's where I got it. I came back without my arm. But that's nothing, I live like everyone else... As for the feather, I carried it in a pouch the entire war."

The tractor driver smiled and tucked his sleeve under his belt before continuing:

"There was a surgeon at the hospital who showed a lot of interest in me. He would sit on my cot and say: "Show me your talisman." When I showed him my feather he would laugh and say, "You're quite a fellow, Aleksei." And when I would start to talk about the Meshchera, he'd sit on the cot and wipe his glasses. "I'll come visit you as soon as we end this..."

The tractor driver snuffed out his cigarette butt with his boot and waited for me to say something.

"You had a wise father, Aleksei. Is he still living?"

"No, he's dead."

We slowly approached the wooden pier. It smelled of damp earth and wet nets. The piles of yellow boards on shore gave off an odor of turpentine. A young boy and white dog ran up to the pier. Shouting "Pa-pa!" the boy waved his green twig like a sabre.

The tractor driver tossed his bundle onto the sand.

"If you're going to write about this, don't use my last name. People will laugh and say I'm spreading superstition... That's my boy. His name is Vanya..."

The boy and his father stuck the twig through the wheel and carried it uphill together.

The rest of the way we talked with the captain about the human mind, how it could think up such things as crane feathers and flowering ferns for luck.

"Well," said the captain as he gazed through the binoculars at yet another island, "I was also in the trenches. A man has to know and love and protect his land. That way it's easier to die for it and makes you want to live there more than anything else."

A motorboat was waiting for us at the Kopanovo pier. We greeted a friend who worked on the reserve.

"You picked the right time. It's the height of the floods."

In the evening stillness the water looked like glass. The red sun was a burning disc sinking into the water. Like the goodbye wave of a hand, a golden ray glowed in the violet haze. Noisily and heavily, the grouse flew away from the water-covered oaks and birches. Flocks of geese were visible to the right and to the left, as before. For centuries birds have been flying along a route that brings them here to rest and eat.

We rode thirty kilometers across the water. Somewhere in the forest, the Pra River of the Meshchera empties into the Oka. But the only way you could determine the river-bed now was by some conspicuous trees. We moved into the flooded forest, using our oars and hands to stay clear of the oaks and birches. The sunset had set the water on fire. We raised our oars and remained motionless.

"What do you think?" our friend asked us softly.

We said nothing. The moon appeared among the black

oaks. It was as red, round and big as the sun had been forty minutes earlier.

We made our way through forest clearings and glades, sometimes squeezing through thickets. We saw a bird sitting on a tiny island, and watched as it lazily flew away. Then we saw it was not an island after all but a dead young elk. The water had caught it in the lowlands, and although a saving island had been in sight, the animal had apparently not had the strength to reach it. The same fate had befallen two boars. It was rather frightening to see such things.

"Hoo-hoo-hoo!" screeched an owl, its dark round shape flying over the water. The aluminum bottom of the boat thumped against the ground. We had come upon a small island in the submerged forest. The hill of lime trees smelled of smoke and the dampness of last year's leaves. While we unloaded our bags the moon transformed itself from a red five-kopeck piece to a gold coin. It looked as if yellow lights were lighting our path to the lone dark house; actually, it was the moonlight that made the fluffy blossoms on the willows appear to be illumination...

The animals were in danger. Forty hares had already been brought to Lime Tree Hill. For the past two days they had been rescued from small islands, tree-stumps and floating logs. The largest island of hares had not yet been flooded, but it was important to hurry—the water was continuing to rise.

Our tarpaulin canoe sounded like a big drum. We pushed it into the water and moved through the forest. We were careful not to run against any tree limbs. If we punctured the boat, our cameras and the recorder would sink to the bottom, and we would find ourselves in the same situation as the hares.

Floating in the water were scraps of clothing from the previous year, a thrush's nest, also from the previous year, and logs washed away from a stack of firewood. A wet frightened mouse with eyes like beads was peeping out of its nest. A woodpecker was pecking the bark away from a dead pine, the slivers of wood flowing in a narrow white path in the water. There was a soft, warm drizzle, and the smell of rotten tree stumps and last year's wet sedge. We pulled up to a black snag that resembled a bear. Boris asked us not to breathe too loudly, not to rustle the tarpaulin and not to touch the oars. Putting on his raincoat, he took out the microphone that was covered by an old mitten. Then he began to record the wood-

pecker's knock, the babble of the water and the cries of the cranes flying nearby. Cranes cry out loud and often when the weather is foggy. You can't describe this sound that conveys both alarm and sadness. That's the way it seems to humans at any rate. But cranes probably cry out not to get lost or perhaps to summon others to a spring wedding.

Our long boat became caught in an oak and birch thicket. We got out and walked, the water spilling over into our boots. Finally we arrived at the famous hare island, which was a strip of land covered with pale, old grass. We rubbed our eyes when we saw all the hares. There was a whole warren of them, and standing in the middle were two cranes, probably the same two we had heard while in our boat. We were very still. The cranes slowly and majestically stepped about; the hares jumped all around.

We stood until our legs grew numb. We couldn't shoot any pictures—the rain would leave droplets on the lens. The cranes saw us, called out and flew away. The hares immediately panicked and ran. We could count them now—there were twenty-seven. We decided to leave: they wouldn't drown overnight; we could wait for good weather to take our pictures.

The next morning we woke up to the sun and hastily climbed into our canoe.

The cranes heard us from a distance and silently circled the clearing overhead. The hares, like soldiers, stood in formation at the far side of the island. Standing straight and still, they would wriggle their ears or, like drummers, bat their paws close to their noses.

The highest point in the forest was the wooded ridge with two lime trees and bushes of reddish rose-willows. The water had gradually pushed the hares from the lowlands, and they had all gathered here as a group. They were emaciated, already having eaten the rose-willows and even oak bushes clean. The hares were upset. They were pressed tightly together and seemed to be holding a council: what was worse—the water or these two people coming at them from different directions? The bravest, or perhaps the most cowardly, hare suddenly darted away, ran under our legs and scurried into the shallow water. Splash! Splash! It sounded like clumps of earth were falling in the water. After swimming about twenty meters the hare became frightened and turned back to the island—it was better to withstand misfortune with all the rest.

We took pictures every which way, climbing the lime tree and walking around the different sides of the island. The hares seemed to have grown accustomed to us and began gnawing the rose-willows. But if we took a step in their direction, the entire group would shuttle furiously from one end of the island to the other.

It's funny to watch a running hare up close and see how the hind legs overtake the forelegs. The animal is like a spring: first curled into a furry ball and then stretching out its limbs.

Twenty-seven curious hares watched us hang a net across the island. In the poem *Grandpa Mazai and the Hares* by Nikolai Nekrasov, old man Mazai claimed that the hares weren't afraid of him. But apparently they have learned a thing or two since that distant time. They wouldn't jump into our boat. Still, we had to try to save them: the water was continuing to rise.

We chased the hare into the net, slowly at first and then with shouts and the waving of hats. The net was stretched too taut, and the hares, rushing into it like torpedoes, tore holes in it. We tried again. The hares became entangled and began to beat their hind legs furiously. You had to grab them precisely by their hind legs, otherwise they could tear your jacket or even rip open your stomach. The hares howled. Few people know what a deadly frightened hare sounds like. It cries pathetically, like a baby. This sound was enough to send the other hares into a panic. They jumped in the water. Two or three of the most frightened swam off somewhere, four others we caught. The rest came back on their own.

The hares howled and tried to bite us when we put them in sacks. Once on the ground, the sacks began to hop around. It was an unbelievable, fairy-tale sight. We poured the water out of our boots, dried our trousers and counted our cuts and bites. We also took pictures of the hares and recorded their howls. Then we carried the sacks to a large flat-boat, which could now rightfully be called an ark. We put the hares in cages and slowly made our way home.

Along the way we picked up a badger. We had seen its large burrow on the hare' island, but it had evidently not been able to make it back there before the floods. Either that or it didn't like the hares. The badger was sitting by an oak tree stump surrounded by water. It tried to swim away but we caught it.

We tagged the hares on Lime Tree Hill. We did not catch them just to help save them: we needed to determine where the hares lived, how many of them died and how many left the reserve to settle in the surrounding forests. We tagged the hares with a number and the word "Moscow" on their ears. It was a simple procedure, but the hares screamed bloody hell. We let them go as soon as we were done. They made five or six tentative hops, not trusting in their freedom, and then scurried to the far corner of the island.

That evening we were sorting out our findings and listening to a Moscow radio station on a pocket transistor. Suddenly the forester's wife appeared:

"You're wanted on the telephone."

It was the reserve director calling from the chief administrative building.

"Make sure you write about the poacher we nabbed," he said, his voice filled with indignation. "He got on the island and shot six doe-hares point-blank. They were pregnant... We are taking action, but you write about it. His name is Yeliseev—Victor Yeliseev, and he works at the smelting plant. Lashmy village in Kasimov region. Write about it. We have to bring them to court, shame them... They ought to be skinned alive..."

Sixty or seventy hares were sitting out the floods on Lime Tree Hill. You would see them when you went from the house to the boats. They hid in the tall weeds, in the ditch next to the hollow willows and in old cart-wheel tracks. Nothing could harm the hares here except for the occasional eagle-owl that might come out of the forest. On the moonlit evenings after the engine of our motorboat was silent, the hares would jump around under the windows of the house. If you opened the door, the bluish apparitions ran into the bushes.

Only Tuman the dog couldn't understand why the hares were being protected. He rattled his chain and hungrily sniffed the air: hares were his hunting specialty. Rubbing against your boots, he would look at you with devotion and sniff the air again. "Why won't you let me go?" he seemed to be saying. "I smell hares! Hares are here!"

All the living creatures were used to the yearly flooding, but it was still a hard thing to endure after the winter. As best they could they waited out the ten to twelve days

of high water. Travelling by boat you could see a fox crouched in the fork of an oak tree: it might be hungry but at least it was dry. An elk had been chased by the flood into the thick birch-wood. Water was up to its belly, but this animal was used to the cold. It would make it. The flood made nomads of the beavers: you would find them in the most unexpected places. For some reason they weren't afraid. They would either sleep on a warm snag or swim near the boats. Water was no obstacle to beavers. During the floods they moved out and made their homes in new locations. The muskrat was the same. Sometimes you would see a reddish-brown Robinson Crusoe on a small raft made from refuse and sedge. The little animal plopped into the water whenever a boat appeared. But as soon as the danger passed, it climbed back onto its life raft.

The floods carried with them all manner of small creatures—mice, moles and shrews—and, together with garbage, brought them to the trees, submerged up to the birdhouses in them and to the tops of the bushes. Bald eagles, magpies and crows could be found here all day long.

Over by the Oka River flocks of geese were flying, and each day their numbers were increasing. It was a busy season for ornithologists. The Meshchera reserve is the chief tagging centre for the USSR, and now was the best time to tag birds. Different means were used to catch them: an almost invisible web-like net, traditional nets for catching song-birds and—the height of technology — the cannon net.

The latter I saw for the first time at the Meshchera reserve. Three tall metal containers are filled with sacks of gunpowder. The projectiles are three metal rods to which a net is attached. Of course it is only the large birds that are caught this way. The net catches migrating geese that were previously caught only one at a time. Even now they are not easy to catch: who can guess where among the innumerable islets a flock might land? Yet ornithologist Vladimir Panchenko and his partner, Aleksei Postelnykh, would try their luck each morning. One day we heard the sound that comes only rarely: the tripping of the net.

It wasn't difficult to imagine what had happened. The "cannons" had been set at an angle and propped with dirt. The "gunners" sat in their hideaway at a respectful distance. Through binoculars they watched a flock of geese that had landed on an island. At the right moment the transmitter

was turned on, and the radio impulse triggered the fuses. The metal rods then dropped the net over the flock.

"Twenty-eight geese!" they cried to us from their boat. Not bad. The bird captors were ecstatic. Each was wearing a necklace of white rings. The captured geese were surprisingly docile, but they still didn't like having their legs tagged and tried to bite the men on their arms and cheeks. After the birds were measured, weighed, photographed and recorded, they were set free. They flew straight out of the men's hands and all in the same direction—against the wind and toward the boundless sparkling water.

Approximately 70,000 white-fronted geese gather each spring in the Meshchera. This is a long migration stop-over for them. Where and where from do they fly? In recent years, tagging and radar have established that the geese winter in Belgium and Holland and nest in the northern USSR, in the tundra. Their spring journey of several thousand kilometers is conducted in stages. The birds fly steadily for ten to twelve hours (at an average speed of 80 kilometers per hour) and then stop for a lengthy rest on the flood waters to gather their strength for another flight.

The first "station" where the geese land is on the plains of the Baltic coast of Poland and the GDR. Next they stop at the Meshchera. Along their journey to the Oka they are seen in the Baltic region, Byelorussia and the Smolensk area. They fly in flocks, and each, just like large modern airplanes, has its own "aerodrome", its own points of departure and landing. Only in emergency situations will they use their reserve fields.

The white-fronted geese stay in the Meshchera for about a month. In mid-May most of them fly directly north (the nearest "station" is the Vyatka River Valley) while some fly northeast to the Ob River Valley and then on to the tundra.

This is the path taken by the geese we see in spring. In autumn they take a different route to fly to Belgium and Holland for the winter—along the northern coast of the USSR and over the Scandinavian lakes. Possibly this is because the plains do not flood in autumn and thus do not provide the birds with a safe place to feed and rest as they do in spring.

I am sitting in a hut. Actually, it is a mossy pit covered with fir-tree boughs. Peering between the fir-needles I can see a large nest. For some reason a pine tree early in its

life split into three branches, and now the trunk has pulled in different directions. It is the best possible place for a large nest, and some storks have noticed it while flying.

From my hut to the nearest home it is about fifteen, if not twenty, versts. But you can't walk safely in just any direction: you are almost sure to come to a lake, marsh or pond of dark water. It is precisely because of the limited accessibility and abundance of appropriate food (loaches and frogs) that the black storks nest in the Meshchera. Unlike the white storks that live on people's roofs, the black storks are extremely cautious. Not many remain in the world, and in the Meshchera there are only a few pairs.

I very much wanted to take some pictures. The forester and I built a look-out about a week ago when we found the nest and scared two of the birds that had been circling the forest. The storks usually noticed the slightest change around their nest, but we were counting on our camouflage. While waiting for the birds I began to leaf through my worn diary, the one I started a month ago when I came to the Meshchera.

April is coming to its close. The floods have begun to recede, but the geese continue to fly. We travelled by boat an hour from Brykin Pine Forest to Staroye Cordon and saw eight flocks of birds. The river stream flows along the same course as that of the geese, perhaps it even serves as a compass for the birds. The river's name is ancient—the Pra. Its water seems no less ancient. It is infused with peat and so is the colour of tea even when scooped in the hands. The shore is fringed with uncovered roots that have almost all been dug through by beavers.

Staroye Cordon is comprised of two log cabins, two wood-shingled barns, three beehives, a well with a sweep, deer feeding troughs and a heavy wooden boat. Forest and water surround the place. The snow has melted, but the bottom of the well is still blue with ice. The water you draw out in the bucket makes your teeth chatter, and the well's fresh oak frame gives the tea water the aroma of cognac.

The house I moved into is called the "stationary point". During the summer biology students live here. Last year one of the scientists was a lucky fisherman—the white toothy jaws of a pike are hanging on a thread in the corridor. The smell of the cold stove, old wood and some bottles of medicine standing on a shelf fill the air. I have everything here that I need: a table, bed and stove. I will

be living here for a month. For eight hours each day I am supposed to be at my desk. But in the early mornings and at dusk I can go into the forest.

The first day, I can't sit at my desk. The geese are flying: I can hear them outside my window. These are surely the last flocks.

In the fields outside my cabin the pasqueflowers are in blossom. When the sun is low on the horizon, the purple flowers begin to glow. At night they bow their heads. Perhaps that's why they are called pasqueflowers ["sleeping-herb" in Russian.—*Ed.*]

In the forest I came upon a contraption that looked like a little stove made from pine pegs. The entrance to it was spread with clean sand from the river. There was evidence that a wood grouse had been there. It had dug around in the sand at the entrance but had been afraid to go inside. If it had, it would not have come out. A small lever would have been tripped and two shafts with a piece of canvass stretched between them would have fallen. The wood grouse would then have been tagged and set free.

The best time to catch wood grouse is in autumn. The food they eat in winter—pine needles—is coarse and can only be digested with the help of the small pebbles the bird swallows that act as millstones. These pebbles are used as bait. In spring the wood grouse eat the soft pasqueflowers, but they still show an interest in pebbles.

Yuri Kisilev, a wood grouse specialist, is staying at the neighbouring Kormilitsyno Cordon. I called him to see if we could go and watch the birds. "We'll have to hurry," he told me, "the mating season will soon be over..."

At two o'clock in the morning we felt our way through the forest to the mating spot. There was a soft mist, and the moon shone in the black branches; the beds of moss were filled with water, and the fallen twigs and branches were wet and slippery. It was unbelievably boggy, but we were still able to walk through the marsh. We cupped our hands to our ears... We didn't hear much, but two wood grouse, it seemed, were hungry for love. Now we had to make our way when they sang: three or four quick steps and freeze. I found myself on one foot with water seeping into my boot, but I couldn't make a sound. I had to wait until the wood grouse stopped singing its song, which began with a rattle and ended with soft silibants, before I could take the next three steps.

My heart felt like it would jump out of my jacket and

my face was streaming with sweat. Then I saw my forest prize—a wood grouse sitting right over my head. I could distinctly hear all the inflections in its ancient song. When the wood grouse began to pound out its song, it was possible to talk, find a more comfortable position and even shoot a gun. The bird would not hear it. I got my camera ready. Unfortunately, the bird was sitting among the entwining branches. The only thing we could see was the spread of its tail.

It would have been a good shot for a gun but not for a camera. And there was as yet little light. The birch bark had only the faintest rosy tinge.

A branch creaked at the wrong moment, and the black bird zoomed away like a cannon shot to rest in the misty dell. This was the last bird in the mating spot. Catkins have appeared on the aspens, and, according to forest phenology, this is the time when the wood grouse matings come to an end.

Aside from the people in the Cordon there are many rowdy creatures. Two bright white roosters are constantly fighting under my window for absolute power over the hens. It's spring, and the hens are cackling in high spirits. But there still aren't many eggs on the table. We will have milk though. A few days ago a spotted cow gave birth. Anticipating the event, the forester laid fresh straw in the barn. But Rosa didn't want anything to do with the "maternity ward". She disappeared for a couple of days and yesterday returned from the forest with a calf. The cute little animal has taken easily to suckling. Now it will be difficult to teach it to drink from a bucket.

The nine sheep that live here form an amazingly close collective. Wherever one leads, the others follow. The day before yesterday, a young black sheep wandered away from the rest and immediately paid for it. The sheep became caught in a fence and tore up its leg so badly that it lay down as if dead. The forester ran for his knife but then decided, without much hope, to try to heal the wound. He cut down a small lime tree to make a *lubok* (tree bark — while doctors today say to use a splint, in old Rus they advised putting on a *lubok*). He then wrapped a bandage over the *lubok*. The sheep didn't look too happy, but no one except Druzhok the dog paid it any mind. It's clear that Druzhok dislikes the sheep with the swollen white leg. As a matter of fact, the master of the yard looks for any excuse to get into a

fight. Before he came to live in the Cordon, Druzhok guarded a village herd, and, according to the forester, he was constantly nipping the cow tails. The brown dog was ready to eat me and snarled and foamed at the mouth. I looked him right in the eye and repeated in a calm voice about fifty times: "Druzhok, Druzhok..." The dog was confused. Blinking his eyes, he all of a sudden feigned interest in a fly. A piece of city sausage showed the animal that it wasn't always beneficial to nip tails.

There are two cats around the house, and they each have different dispositions. The gentle one will rub against your leg and pitifully plead for tidbits under the table. The dirty brown one is clearly a rascal. It doesn't like people and observes the yard from a perch atop the well sweep or a tall pine tree. I immediately gathered that it was hunting in the forest. Sure enough, I met it about a kilometer away from the house with a wagtail in its mouth. The cat ran back into the forest as if it had been whipped and has stayed away from the house for several days now.

The biggest yet gentlest creature in the yard is Vaska the black gelding. But the horse has caused the forester a lot of trouble because it is always trying to run away. Vaska was born in the forest village of Charus about fifteen kilometers away from Staroye Cordon. Evidently Vaska remembered the other horses there. As soon as it was let out to pasture it would head for Charus. After the gelding was brought back twice, its hind legs were tied together. But Vaska still managed to hobble away. They would catch the horse half-way along the road to Charus. Vaska realized it wasn't safe to take the road and started to cut through the forest. One can only wonder at the horse's sense of direction. No man would risk going into a marsh forest without a road...

This evening a crane whooped near the Cordon. I stood at the door and listened. The cow stopped chewing, the sheep raised their heads and Druzhok, who usually barks at any sound, was silent. The crane was whooping and all around there was total silence. Once heard, it is a sound impossible to forget.

Drops were falling in the birch-wood, but the sky was bright blue. Birch sap flowed like rain from broken branches. Some unknown pumping mechanism pushed the sweet liquid up the trunks: everyone knew the sap was running.

I watched a woodpecker indulge itself. After drilling into a birch tree close to its own pine, it drank its fill, flew

off and hammered against the bark like a machine-gun five or six times, and then came back to the birch.

Our lame sheep also turned out to have a sweet tooth. Some beavers had chopped down four birch trees on the shore of the bayou. Though the trees were gone, the sap continued to flow. The stumps stood like guttered candles with the sap congealed on them as a whitish, transparent gelatin. It was around these stumps that the sheep was recuperating.

I couldn't resist the temptation. At night I tied a tin can to the white tree bark. [...]

Yesterday I left the forester's quilted jacket out in the sun under my window. The jacket was old and had cotton coming out of numerous holes. Someone spread the word in the forest about this wonderful bed of soft material. They came from everywhere! Goldfinches, blue tits, some red-throated birds, a large shrike and wagtails. They worked to the accompaniment of the songs of many voices. There was an especially large number of cuckoos in the area. In the morning I would see a cuckoo flying suspiciously low over the shore, looking for other nests. The usual victim of this strange bird in these parts is the wagtail. I have watched closely but I have never seen a cuckoo laying eggs. Yet I have often seen a tiny bird driving a cuckoo away, pecking it in flight and attacking the cuckoo when it lands on a branch. One might be tempted to surmise that the cuckoo is being driven away from a nest. But hawks, eagle, owls and crows are driven away in the same manner, and the cuckoo closely resembles the hawk.

The starlings' nests were ready. A few days ago I saw a starling drop an egg in flight. A hen gobbled it up, shell and all.

We had one warm day and the forest was covered with an aromatic green haze — the birch buds had popped. I pulled down a branch and looked at the green nodules. The leaves were the size of a newborn baby's fingernail.

In a white-moss pine forest I came upon an entire realm of ant-hills. There were seventeen villages in the kingdom, and, of course, a capital city. This metropolis stood between three birch trees. The base of the perfectly shaped mountain was white sand, while the dark pointed cone was made from needles and twigs. The sixteen other ant-hills were satellites of the capital. The millions of inhabitants of the

kingdom ran across the needles and birch leaves. I closed my eyes, and the rustle of the dried leaves sounded like a light rain. It was impossible to tell if the insects were fighting or visiting.

I dropped a stick over the warm brown hill and it immediately glistened white in the sun with the ants' chemical defence. I licked the stick — it was very sour.

A star-lit sky and an ant-hill are somewhat similar. You can look at each time and time again but you'll never cease to be amazed.

I unfolded a map and looked at the local place names. They sounded mysterious, like dark pond water: Charus, Yerus, Kochemary, Koltuki, Kursha, Lamsha. These were cordons and villages. The lakes were called Kalnos, Veshurki, Pesmerki and Mymrus. No one has ever counted the marshes here. Topographers draw an area of small dashes to designate the marshy lowlands of Meshchera.

The forester at Staroye Cordon and his wife are from the village of Kochemary. As a matter of fact, almost all the foresters in the reserve and all their wives were born in Kochemary.

The forester's name is Nikolai Tsarev. He limps slightly. He had a sedentary job in Kochemary—carrying the mail on horseback, working as a tailor, weaving baskets and keeping bees. For the past few years he has been living in the Cordon and became forester technician. A motorcycle helps to make it easier for him to get about the forest, while his wife has turned out to be a good housekeeper. He loves and takes care of the forest. In other words, he has found his place.

Sometimes people from Kochemary visit the Cordon. A week ago the forester's sister Maria came bringing jellied meat and a large white farm cheese. Two evenings we sat by a lamp, and I listened to stories about Kochemary — stories about the Raketa hydrofoil that is now plying the Oka, about the recent fire that burned down forty homes within an hour, about the priest who acquired a motorbike but had to exchange it for a horse because the old women didn't like the "contraption". The forester is a good storyteller and his speech is vivid with colloquialisms.

In the evenings the forester and I go to check the nets. We usually catch pike, tench and crucian carp. Just recently we caught a bream so large that its dried air-bladder looks

like a child's balloon hanging on the wall. We used an ax to chop the fish on a tree stump. We mostly catch carp in the net. The water is warmer and the carp spawning season has begun. I sometimes wander around the submerged willow bushes in hip boots, and the carp dart from under my legs and out of the water with uncharacteristic swiftness. It looks like someone is throwing hot reddish copper bars from the bushes.

The foresters at the reserve are allowed to fish if they will measure and weigh their catch, and also save the scales for science. It is not particularly difficult and the forester and I do what we can to keep science apace. We cook up fish soup in a well-worn kettle on the river bank.

I discovered two strange beavers at the bend of the Parom River. They saw me standing there but didn't hide. They continued to swim but took turns beating their tails against the water, like women thrashing clothes.

The trees by the water have been chopped down. The last one to fall to the beavers was a huge oak. I could just imagine how much effort it took for them to gnaw through that bark as hard as steel. I felt sorry for the beavers and brought them a bunch of young aspen branches, thinking as I threw them in the water: "This will be a treat for them." The next morning all that was left was the white core. I was overjoyed and thought I could get the beavers to trust me by bringing them such treats. The beavers would have surely laughed if they had known of my plan. That same evening as I was walking around the pond I noticed the beavers' path. This path connected the pond with the outside, and the outside was nothing but water. Everywhere around there were "treats"—aspen, birch, lime trees and mountain ash. And all these submerged trees were accessible to the beavers.

During dry spells the beavers in the river must eat oak. There are few aspens here and the birches have just about disappeared. Just as people during times of hunger survived eating acorns, the beavers eat oak.

The thrush is incredibly stupid. It immediately gives away the location of its nest by its fluttering and chirping. Without even taking a step I saw its neat nest with five blue-speckled eggs. That evening I looked into the nest and it was empty. But at that same moment I followed the chirping and found two more thrush nests. The following day it was the same

story—the nests were empty. Obviously the birds were showing their nests to someone else besides me. Who was the bandit? There were no eggshells nor a trace of any kind. It could have been the cat, since it was always running along the path. Or perhaps magpies. They liked to swoop down from low branches. Or maybe it was a marten.

Small-scale dramas occur in the forest all the time. The week before I saw a peregrine falcon hit a heron in flight. A small bird in comparison with the heron, the falcon clung to its victim and descended into the forest. The next morning I found what was left of the heron next to an alder: its wings, head and scraggy legs. The falcon got everything else.

Kiselev, the wood grouse expert, went to Brykin Pine Forest today. He showed me an identifying tag with the number Zh-13766. This tag and bunch of feathers was all that a goshawk had left of a wood grouse.

The forester and I went to the baths in Brykin Pine Forest. It was wonderful: a twenty-five-kilometer boat ride, the smell of birch in the log bath-house, and tea at Svet's home. We call him Svet, in the old way. But the real name of my old friend who heads the scientific work at the reserve is Svyatoslav Priklonsky.

We stayed at Svet's a long time. When we left it was already night, and a light warm rain was falling. We started up the engine and headed back.

It was a rather frightening ride. We had to guess at the location of the river bends, keep in mind where the oak trees undermined by the flood leaned over the water, and where the blind bayous were. I lay across the boat's bow holding a flashlight. The darkness swallowed the thin ray of light half-way to the shore. But when we rode close to the steep bank a tree covered in white curls leapt out at us. The white colour was dazzling. I turned off the flashlight and the tree disappeared; I turned it on and once again the tree shimmered through the rain in the surrounding darkness. The bird-cherry tree was in blossom. Our boat almost ran aground a few times. The engine stalled: we could hear the rustling sound of the warm rain on the water and the nightingales singing their hearts out in the darkness. Somewhere in the distance, no closer than Spas-Klepiki, thunder rumbled. It sounded as if someone were riding in the sky in an aluminum boat like ours.

We were soaked but for some reason didn't hurry into

the house. I leaned against the rough bark of an oak tree and listened in the darkness: a door slammed, Druzhok barked, oars slapped against the water. The forester's wife had come out in a boat to meet us. An engine could be heard from afar. If the sound had not died out but stopped abruptly, someone would have had to go out—a wide bayou separated the Cordon from the river.

"Wherever have you been?" the woman's voice spoke calmly in the darkness.

"Out," the forester answered his wife in the same calm manner.

I put on a dry shirt and sat by the door. The sky had cleared, and water was falling only from the trees. The reddish planet Mars shone low over the pines. The smell of the pine boughs was as strong in the forest as it had been in the baths. [...]

Svet came by and we went to look for deer antlers. The deer come to Wolf Clearing in April for the warmth. This is the time when they lose their antlers. We found two specimens. One was from the year before, and the mice had gotten to it. The other was fresh, with five large horns, and looked as if it had been cast from metal. Suddenly Svet grabbed me by the arm and nodded in the direction of a pine. A few steps away a wood grouse was sitting on her eggs. The bird assumed we hadn't seen her. She was, in fact, barely visible with her grayish-rusty feathers blending in with the bark and fallen needles. Only the bird's dark shining eyes gave her away. Without making any sharp movements we photographed the wood grouse, changed camera lenses and reloaded our film. For about ten minutes the wood grouse was sure she was unnoticed. We were getting ready to silently withdraw when suddenly the large bird scurried forward and flew away. Six brownish-yellow eggs lay in the nest.

Two days later we returned to the nest. The wood grouse was not there, and the eggs were cold. The next day it was the same. One day I noticed that the eggs were gone too. Someone had found the nest. Could it have been a fox? I got down on my knees to examine the ground. There wasn't a trace of anything, not even a hair.

The "wood grouse affair" might have been closed, if when I was walking around the nest I had not noticed a recently dug rut. It was clear that it wasn't a fox who had turned up the sand. I looked off to the side and found "material

evidence". I know bear manure when I see it: the bear had been wandering around and eaten an ant-hill.

All at once the rustling sounds of the forest took on new meaning for me. The bear had passed by two days before. In all probability it had eaten the woodgrouse eggs. But I had already forgotten about the nest. A bear! This would end the discussion about whether there were bears in the reserve. Obviously there were, though we were further south than Moscow, in the Ryazan forests. I photographed the pile of manure and put a sample of it in a plastic bag. Then I lay some lilies-of-the-valley on top to make it more picturesque. Whistling, I proceeded on my way home and immediately called the reserve. The zoologist who came by looked at the manure and agreed the bear had eaten an ant-hill.

• My evidence, however, was too late. Four days earlier Vasily Chervonny, a reserve worker, had come almost face to face with a bear on the marshes.

I am beginning to miss Moscow. Yesterday I sent my "birchbark letters" with a boat heading in that direction. My friends are used to receiving an envelope with a piece of bark inside that conveys my greetings and request for buns. This forest has a plentiful supply of the ancient paper. The birches have died off from the summer floods, and the tops of the trees fell long ago. Now only the trunks, looking like white bones in the ground, remain. The bark is peeling and the white strips flutter in the breeze.

Crickets are chirping at night, and during the day the cuckoo warbles constantly. The most important singer in the forest—the oriole—has also made an appearance. This golden bird has a remarkable song that starts off like a flute and ends like the screech of a cat.

The arrival of the oriole and blossoming of the mountain ash signals the end of the spring for me.

I spent nine hours in the hut waiting for the storks. They never came to the nest. At dusk I crawled out of the pit, shook out my cramped legs, and then climbed up the pine tree. There were no eggs or hatchlings in the nest. For some reason the two black storks had not started a family and were apparently only staying close to the nest where they had been raised.

I packed my things to head back to Moscow. Yesterday the forester went to look at the grass in the meadow and to-

day began to sharpen his scythe. Our injured sheep recovered within a month and now only limps slightly. Vaska the gelding made it to Charus. The forester gave up and decided to let the horse stay there until autumn. For the entire month that I drew water from the well there was ice on the framework. Yesterday I drew the last bit of ice.

Summer. The goldfinches and the quick rosefinche have been eating fluffy dandelion seeds under my window. I brought my things out to the boat. From every tree hollow, birdhouse and nest came the cries of hungry young voices. New life was ready to fill the forest.

1981